

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1955**



**Halldór Kiljan Laxness**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1955 was awarded to Halldór Laxness "*for his vivid epic power which has renewed the great narrative art of Iceland*".**

Iceland is the cradle of narrative art here in the North. This is ultimately due to the peculiar nature and development of the Icelandic community. In Iceland there were no conditions for the rise of the class society elsewhere so characteristic of the Middle Ages, with its sharp contrast between Church and people, between the learned and the peasants. There books were not, as in other lands, the privilege of a few priests versed in Latin. Even in the Middle Ages literacy was far more widespread among the common people in Iceland than in other parts of Europe. This fact created the basic conditions for the writing down in the native tongue of the old vernacular poetry which, in the rest of northern Europe, our country included, was despised and forgotten.

So it came about that the poor little nation on its remote island created world literature, producing prose tales which the other European countries were unable to match for hundreds of years. *Snorre* and the sagas will always stand out as peaks in the art of historical narrative, as models of style in their perspicuity, clarity, and vigour. The Icelandic

saga, very largely anonymous, is the product of a whole nation's literary talent and independent creative power.

In Iceland the saga has always been held in great honour. To the Icelanders themselves it has given consolation and strength during dark centuries of poverty and hardship. To this very day Iceland stands out as the literary nation of the North *par excellence*, in relation to its population and its resources.

Enormous power is necessary to renew in our time a narrative art which has such traditions. In the book which Halldór Laxness has written about the peasant poet Olafur Ljósvíkingur, he especially touches on the problems and the mission of poetry, making one of the characters say: "That poem is good which reaches the heart of the people. There is no other criterion". But in order to reach the people's heart, literary skill alone, however great, is not enough; the ability to depict events and exploits is not enough. If literature is to be a "light of the world", it must strive to give a true picture of human life and conditions. That goal runs like a continuous thread through most of what Halldór Laxness has written. And as he has an extraordinarily fine sense of the concrete things of human life and, at the same time, an inexhaustible gift of storytelling, he has come to rank as his people's greatest writer of the present age.

One of the most remarkable testimonies of the conflicts in modern cultural life - not only in Iceland but in the whole of the West - is Laxness's early work, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmir* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir), 1927. Despite a certain youthful immaturity, it carries weight as a contemporary document and as a personal confession. The main character is a young Icelander, a writer with an artistic temperament, who, during a roving life in Europe, experiences to the full the chaotic perplexity following the First World War. Like Hans Alienus at one time, he tries to get his bearings and to find a firm footing in life - but what a difference in situation! Far more than a generation in time separates them. On the one hand, peace, unshakable faith in progress, dreams of beauty; on the other, a shattered, bleeding world, moral laxity, anguish, and impotence. Steinn Ellioi finally throws himself into the arms of the Catholic Church. Since Strindberg, few books in the literature of

northern Europe have bared inner conflicts with such uncompromising candour and shown how the individual comes to terms with the forces of the age.

Halldór Laxness did not attain artistic balance until, toward the end of the twenties, he returned to Iceland and found his calling as bard of the Icelandic people. All his important books have Icelandic themes.

He is an excellent painter of Icelandic scenery and settings. Yet this is not what he has conceived as his chief mission. "Compassion is the source of the highest poetry. Compassion with Ásta Sóllilja on earth", he says in one of his best books. Art must be supported by sympathy and love for humanity; otherwise it is worth very little. And a social passion underlies everything Halldór Laxness has written. His personal championship of contemporary social and political questions is always very strong, sometimes so strong that it threatens to hamper the artistic side of his work. His safeguard then is the astringent humour which enables him to see even people he dislikes in a redeeming light, and which also permits him to gaze far down into the labyrinths of the human soul.

Individual people and their destinies always move us most deeply in Halldór Laxness's novels. Against the dark background of poverty, strikes, and strife in the little Icelandic fishing village, the shining, girlish figure of Salka Valka stands out, resolute, capable, and pure of heart.

Even more affecting, perhaps, is the story of Bjartur, the man with the indomitable will for freedom and independence, Geijer's yeoman farmer in an Icelandic setting and, with monumental, epic proportions, the settler, the *landnámsman* of Iceland's thousand-year-old history. Bjartur remains the same in sickness and misfortune, in poverty and starvation, in raging snowstorms and face to face with the frightening monsters of the moors, and pathetic to the last in his helplessness and his touching love for his foster daughter, Ásta Sóllilja.

The story of the peasant poet Olafur Ljósvíkíngur, *Ljós heimsins* (The Light of the World), 1937-40, is possibly his greatest work. It is based on the contrast between a

miserable environment and the heaven-born dreams of one who is a friend and servant of beauty.

In *Islandsklukkan* (The Bell of Iceland), 1943-46, Laxness for the first time sets the scene in a bygone age. And he indeed succeeds in giving the atmosphere of the period both of Iceland and of Denmark. Stylistically, it is a masterpiece. But even here it is chiefly individuals and their destinies that one remembers: the wretched tatterdemalion Jón Hreggvíósson; "the fair maid" Snaefriour Eydalín; and above all, the learned collector of manuscripts, Arnas Arnaeus, in whom Iceland lives more robustly than in anyone else.

Halldór Laxness has guided literary development back to common and traditional ground. That is his great achievement. He has a vivid and personal style, easy and natural, and one gets a strong impression of how well and how flexibly it serves his ends.

One more thing must be emphasized if Laxness's position is to be properly understood. There was a time when the Icelandic authors chose another Scandinavian language for their art, not merely for economic reasons, but because they despaired of the Icelandic language as an instrument for artistic creation. Halldór Laxness has, in the field of prose, renewed the Icelandic language as an artistic means of expression for a modern content, and by his example he has given the Icelandic writers courage to use their native tongue. Broadly speaking, therein lies his greatest significance, and this is what has given him a strong and very respected position in his own land.

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